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SUBJECT: INDIAN AF-PAK PUNDITS VOICE "CRITICAL APPRECIATION" FOR PRESIDENT'S DECEMBER 1 SPEECH

¶11. (SBU) Summary: The overall reaction of selected Political Section interlocutors - a diverse group of journalists, commentators, academics, think-tank analysts, and parliamentarians from different religious communities and political orientations - to President Obama's December 1 speech on Afghanistan was guardedly positive. While contacts approved of the President's emphasis on development and agriculture assistance and a re-affirmation of USG commitment to the region, their expressions of "critical appreciation" also included dismay over the setting of July 2011 as a beginning date for the transfer of U.S. troops out of Afghanistan. We pushed back by reminding interlocutors that July 2011 is only a starting date, a point that seems completely lost in local discourse. While interlocutors had varying reactions to speech content regarding Pakistan, they were virtually united in their insistence that the USG toughen its position on Pakistan and exert greater pressure on Islamabad to crack down on terror groups regardless of where the activities of such groups are focused. End Summary.

Afghanistan: Focus on July 2011

¶12. (SBU) Most of the contacts whom we polled provided an overall positive assessment of the portion of the speech that dealt with Afghanistan. Several, like Jamia Millia Islamia University professor Radha Kumar, voiced praise for USG recognition that development - particularly agricultural development - was key to stability. Other interlocutors such as freelance columnist Mahendra Dev, opined that the speech was a winner because it communicated a renewed U.S. commitment to the region. Dev told us that he also teaches a journalism class at a local college, and he devoted yesterday's class to a debate among students over the merits of the new USG approach. He divulged that about half the students saw it as a strategy for success, while the other half characterized it as "too little and too late."

¶13. (SBU) A recurring theme voiced by most commentators with whom we spoke (and a theme featured prominently in media editorials, some of which were written by our contacts) was distinct unease over the speech reference to July 2011 as the time in which the U.S. will begin the transfer of forces out of Afghanistan. "Hindustan Times" foreign editor Pramit Pal Chaudhuri voiced a representative opinion by expressing "skepticism that much can be achieved between the time all new troops are deployed and July 2011." Sushant Sareen, an Af-Pak specialist in an Indian Foreign Ministry-funded think tank, opined that mention of a withdrawal commencement date "cancels out all the positive parts of the speech" because it sends the message in Afghanistan and Pakistan that the USG is

not a long-term partner and is looking for an exit from the region, thus obliging Karzai and the Pakistani leadership to "start hedging their bets." Several interlocutors claimed that a stated withdrawal date violates the new COIN strategy that emphasizes building confidence among the host nation population in a long-term international commitment of support. We reminded our interlocutors that the July 2011 date is only a starting date, a point that seemed completely lost among local pundits.

¶4. (SBU) Not all contacts viewed the July 2011 reference in negative terms. Some, like think-tanker Kaustav Chaudhury, opined that the eighteen month period may be sufficient to develop sufficient governance and security capacity among Afghans in conflict areas to undercut the Taliban's appeal and their ability to retake by force areas that had been cleared, held, and built-up. Afghan scholar VP Vaidik argued that the President's timeline was required to create a sense of realistic urgency within the Karzai government and Afghan army to stand on their own feet.

Pakistan: Keep Up the Pressure

¶5. (SBU) We encountered a wide variety of opinions on the portions of the speech that dealt with Pakistan. Sandeep Dixit, Senior Defense Correspondent for "The Hindu" daily, intoned that while the USG strategy in Afghanistan seems "unrealistic because you alienated your local allies with your preoccupation about corruption," the new approach toward Pakistan is "more pragmatic" because it signals a new USG

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toughness toward Islamabad. Think-tanker Kaustav Chaudhury maintained that the speech was "wise to underplay in public Pakistan's role in Afghanistan" and posited that the "acid test" in U.S.-Pakistan relations will be whether Islamabad takes action against the Haqqani network in North Waziristan.

Former GOI minister Arief Muhammad Khan warned against excessive reliance on Pakistan to sort out the situation in Afghanistan and advised us instead to compel Saudi Arabia to exercise its significant influence among Afghan and Pakistani Taliban. Local media maven Saeed Naqvi called on the USG to exert more pressure on Pakistan to crack down on terror groups regardless of where the activities of such groups are focused, a view expressed in one form or another by most other interlocutors.

Ruminations from Parliamentarians

¶6. (SBU) Given that foreign policy seldom enters the Indian domestic political debate, the new Afghanistan and Pakistan strategy is unlikely to get much attention in the Indian Parliament, which is currently in session. The reaction of Members of Parliament (MPs) contacted by the Embassy was guardedly positive. Congress MP Madhu Goud Yaskhi welcomed the decision to send additional troops to Afghanistan but suggested that the United States should consider sending forces into Pakistan as well. He told Poloff that pursuing the Taliban inside Afghanistan is a worthy objective but the primary goal should be to target the terrorist networks within Pakistan because they are more dangerous.

¶7. (SBU) Balbir Punj of the Bharatiya Janata Party was pleased that President Obama had taken Prime Minister Manmohan Singh "into confidence" before his West Point speech. Punj said that the strategy announced by President Obama was "good but with shortcomings." Echoing Yaskhi, Punj told Poloff that the United States would never be able to stabilize the region if it did not "finish" the Taliban and Al Qaeda "mentors" living in Pakistan. Both Yaskhi and Punj misread the July 2011 date and raised questions about this so-called exit timeline. Yaskhi asked whether 18-24 months would be enough time to get the job done and whether the United States would be letting down Afghanistan once again if it departs without completing the mission. Punj called the

timeline premature. "What makes you think you can finish this in 18 months?" he asked.

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